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At a day school in East Palo Alto, California, Negro preschool children attend classes which offer reading and mathematics instruction. The staff consists of volunteer teachers, most of whom are white and credentialed. The school's enrollment exceeds 200 pupils. Parents are encouraged to participate in the program, and when controversy over support of the school arose in the school district, the school continued to gain community support. In the summer of 1967, the Office of Economic Opportunity allocated $49,000, and 120 local teenagers were hired to work with the children. These teenagers themselves attended classes in English and mathematics. By June 1968 enrollment of 500 is expected. In addition, tentative plans are underway for a private school in the East Palo Alto-East Menlo Park ghetto area. (LB)

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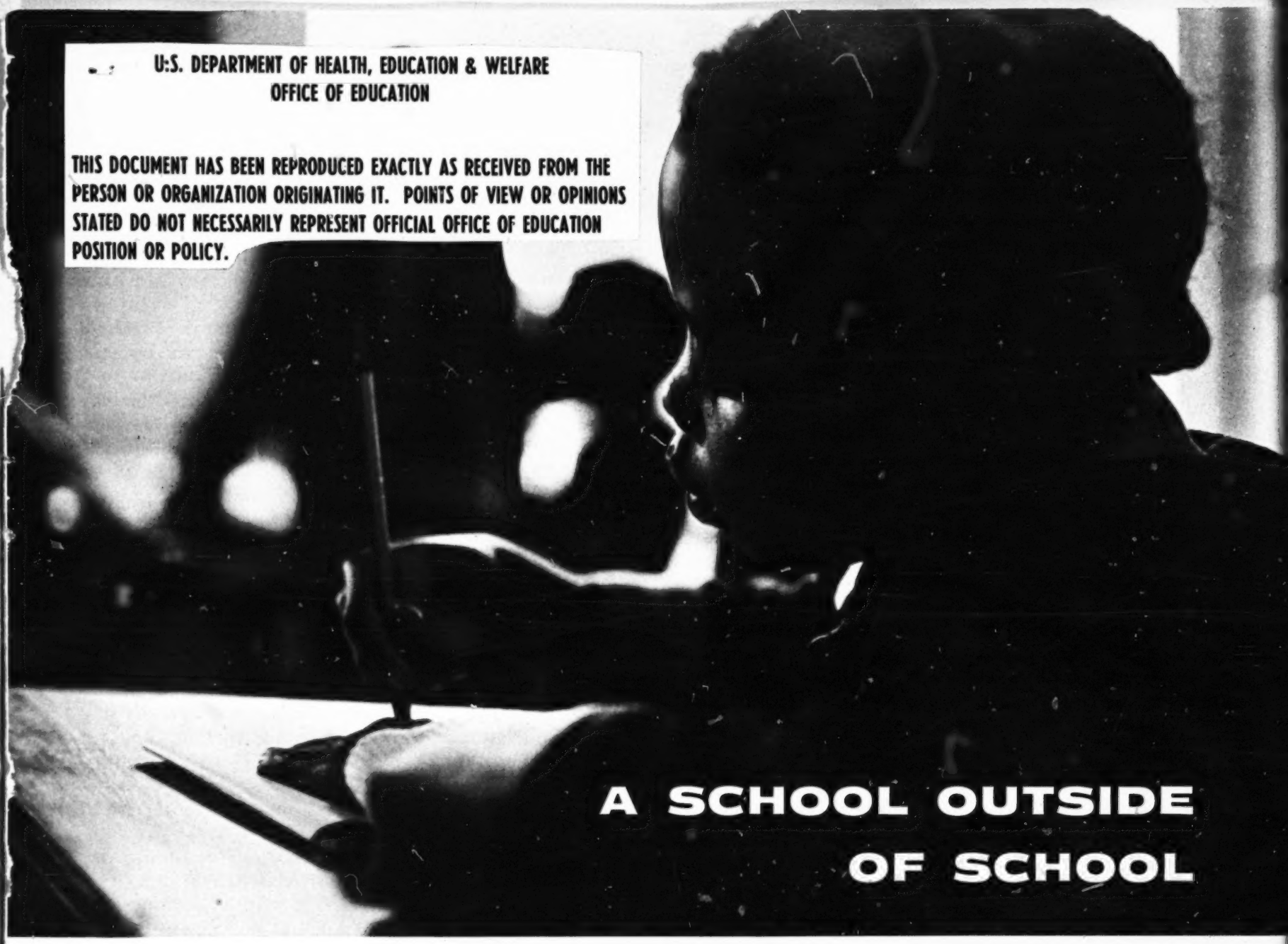

A SCHOOL OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

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By Ronald D. Goben

THE SMALL BROWN BOY stood at the blackboard and proudly wrote: "I am a big tan man." His teacher beamed. "When we started, he didn't even know his ABC's," she said.

The start had been made less than nine months earlier. The boy had learned to read and write in what was at best a patchwork school that met only on Saturdays and in the evenings when regular schools were closed, and held classes in any buildings available.

It had no paid faculty, no "qualified" administrators and no money. All it really had at the start was the enthusiasm and dedication of a group of Negro women convinced their children were being shortchanged in the public schools of East Palo Alto, Calif., and determined to find some way to upgrade their education.

This summer, their East Palo Alto Day School was given a $49,000 grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity for a program in which teen-agers were put to work teaching children aged 4, 5 and 6. Even the most optimistic could hardly have predicted that sort of recognition when the first session of the school was held on a gray Saturday morning last October at St. John the Baptist Church. ▶

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Principal Robert Hoover has high praise for his associates.

Only a handful of parents were present for that first meeting, and only 22 youngsters began the first classes. Few of the parents at the meeting were themselves well educated. For example, Mrs. Gertrude Wilks, who provided much of the impetus for the school, was forced to abandon her formal education well short of high school. But she was determined to do something about education in the area. As president of East Palo Alto's Mothers for Equal Education (MEE), she had been increasingly critical of the opportunities available to the Negro youngsters through the public schools.

East Palo Alto and its schools are rapidly becoming all-Negro. There is relatively little money, because of a low tax base for the community's schools. But among East Palo Alto's advantages is its proximity to communities such as Palo Alto and Stanford University with a high level of educational talent. Mrs. Wilks used contacts she had made in civil rights activities to recruit willing workers from that talent pool. Quite a few other teachers were professionals who came to the day school in addition to holding regular jobs in East Palo Alto's Ravenswood Elementary School District.

Some of the recruited teachers, Mrs. Wilks said, never missed a session at the day school—and their schedules often included three nightly classes a week in addition to those on Saturday mornings. Besides holding classes, teachers frequently picked up the youngsters during the week to take them to school. They also held meetings of their own in which they compared methods and progress.

The teachers, of course, were not paid—but some volunteered money to help meet incidental expenses of the school. Most of them were white, but they became a part of East Palo Alto's community life; they attended Negro churches and church-related functions to meet the children and their parents in a nonschool atmosphere.

By the time the "school year" ended on June 10, there were 30 teachers, most with California teaching credentials. Robert Hoover, community organizer who is principal of the day school, called them "perhaps the most faithful teachers ever seen in a school."

The principal also had high praise for his fellow day school administrators. Although they lacked the credentials of regular administrators, he said they were far better at "communications." In his words, "this is education—communicating with people. If you can't do it, you can't educate them."

By June, enrollment had risen to more than 200, all the pupils voluntarily giving up their free time because they felt they were learning.

It is not easy to measure just how much the day school has helped them, because they have been attending regular schools at the same time. Still, the youngsters have made progress. Difficult as it may be to pinpoint just where the progress was made, the day school does offer an opportunity for much more individual attention than is usual in regular schools, if nothing else.

The day school has concentrated on reading and mathematics, the two basic subjects that the organizing group felt had to be strengthened above all others for the Negro youngsters. Of those two subjects, reading was emphasized far more heavily. About three-fourths of the staff taught reading—one group using the Sullivan programmed reading method now in vogue in several so-called "advanced" school districts throughout the nation.

Mrs. Wilks believes one reason for the success of the day school is the fact that parents "feel more comfortable telling problems" to the leaders of the day school, whereas they feel afraid when approaching officials of regular schools.

Parents are involved as much as possible in helping at the day school. Some are learning how to test youngsters. Others run crossing patrols, and still others are on hand 'to settle the class down." As Mrs. Wilks said, "we don't have any discipline problems."

For a time, at least, the Ravenswood Elementary School District co-operated willingly with the day school. The school district, in fact, agreed to let the day school use a large multipurpose room in Green Oaks School when enrollment had grown so that the church was not large enough. On March 4, youngsters and their parents marched from the church to their new quarters in Green Oaks in one of the high points of the day school year.

That spirit of acceptance and co-operation faded a bit by spring. Ravenswood Supt. Roderic Moore and two of his principals resigned to take other jobs, and in resigning delivered oblique slaps at the day school—implying that the school had weakened morale of teachers and students in the regular schools. Other East Palo Alto community organizations hinted at the same thing.

Two Negroes had just been elected to the Ravenswood board, giving Negroes a 4-to-1 majority of the membership. The new members are Hoover, principal of the day school, and Mrs. Syrtiller Kabat, a day school teacher and member of its "community advisory board."

When Hoover and other board members met with Ravenswood teachers, he was criticized by some teachers for his day school role. He was repeatedly pressed to withdraw his support of the day school now that he was a Ravenswood board member, but his reply was that everyone has a right to get the best education he can wherever he can.

The controversy had no effect on Mrs. Wilks, who, despite taking a back-seat title as "community consultant," is still the principal force behind the day school. She still had many Ravenswood teachers who were volunteering their time, and she had an ever-increasing enrollment.

The school was gaining community support. One group staged a benefit fashion show with the proceeds going to the school; choirs from all the East Palo Alto churches gave a performance at a nearby church, again with proceeds going to the school.

By spring, there was little doubt that the day school was firmly established in East Palo Alto. Then came a project that some considered hopelessly impractical—a plan to keep teen-agers busy during the summer by paying them to teach young children. The money, day school leaders said, would be sought from private groups.

Few private organizations have the kind of money that would be needed for the full-scale program envisioned by the day school, and most observers discounted the chances of getting it. But suddenly, there was an application for federal funds, approval by the San Mateo County Human Resources Commission, and $49,000 in OEO money. This was $5,000 less than had been asked, but school leaders set to work to make up the difference with community contributions.

Under the program, 120 teen-agers were hired to work with 4- to 6-year-olds. They were paid $47 a week to teach the children and to run recreational programs for them in backyard classes operated on a block-by-block basis throughout East Palo Alto. In addition, the teen-agers spent three hours a day in day school classes, improving their own English and mathematics.

Mrs. Wilks, who said she felt "like dancing in the streets" at the news of the federal grant, is confident of a day school enrollment of 500 by the end of the 1967-68 school year.

Now there are plans for a private school for the impoverished area of East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park. The Rev. James Branch, day school superintendent, told parents of "looking forward to acquiring a piece of real estate" for the school, and Mrs. Wilks said a committee had been set up to investigate the possibilities.

A private school for a ghetto may seem impossible. But the possibilities a year ago for the East Palo Alto Day School seemed less than bright, too. ○

At outdoor classes in yards of homes, preschool and kindergarten-age youngsters learned fundamentals from teen-agers.